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AUTHOR Jennings, Clara M.; Gillis-Olion, Marion
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ABSTRACT

Observations made by kindergarten teachers of their children and the researchers' observations of the same children were used in this study to examine the impact of television cartoons on children's free play behavior. Sixty-five kindergarten children and their teachers (N=18) were studied. Each child was individually interviewed and was asked the following questions: (1) What are your favorite television programs? (2) What are your favorite cartoon programs? (3) What are your favorite cartoon characters? (4) Why do you like these characters? Teachers, after observing their children during free play activities (recess/outdoor play activities, and art activities), were asked the following questions: What do you see in the classroom that is evidence of the effect cartoons have on children's behavior? Are you aware of children's program preferences? Results indicated that cartoons were the most preferred type of television program for the children. The most often mentioned program favorites were those aired on weekday afternoons. Children tended to watch these programs in the company of other children and/or adults. Children disliked the news, movies, and scary pictures. Teachers seemed to view cartoons as an influence on children's in-class behavior. Television-related behaviors most often represented in the classroom appeared to be stimulated by the adventure drama shows containing real-life characters rather than by cartoons. Teachers appeared to be unfamiliar with the cartoon programs that were most watched by children, that is, those programs aired on weekday afternoons. Teachers were more familiar with programs aired on Saturdays. (Author/MP)

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THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION CARTOONS ON CHILD BEHAVIOR

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Clara M. Jennings, Ph. D
Associate Professor
Elementary/Early Childhood
Education
University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff

and

Marion Gillis-Olion, Ph.D
Assistant Professor
Elementary/Early Childhood
Education
University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff

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Clara M. Jennings
Marion G. Olion

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THE IMPACT OF TELEVISION CARTOONS ON CHILD BEHAVIOR

INTRODUCTION

As part of a broad scientific inquiry into television and its impact on the viewer, a great deal of evidence has been amassed concerning the relationship between televised violence and stereotypes and the attitudes and behavior of children. From our readings of various research studies and from our own research, there is definitely a relationship between what children watch on television and its effect on their behavior. This can be observed particularly during free play or free choice activities among kindergarten children. Cartoons may stimulate children's imaginative play which may sometimes be in the terms of aggression, racism, or sexism. Using observations made by kindergarten teachers of their children and our own observations of the same children, the study shows that certain televised cartoons may in fact have an impact on young children's free play behaviors.

DESIGN OF STUDY

Subjects for the study were 65 kindergarten children and 18 kindergarten teachers. All children attended the same center which houses six kindergarten classes in the school district. The sample was systematically selected from the school attendance roll by beginning with the first name on the roll and interviewing every third child listed thereafter. All 65 children ranged in age from 5.7 years to 6.4 years. The sample consisted of 24 five year olds, (9 girls, 15 boys) and 41 six year olds (19 girls, 22 boys).

All kingergarten teachers in the school district and four adjacent school districts were surveyed during the study. The rate of return of the surveys was 75%.

During the Spring of the year, 65 kindergarten children were interviewed individually in an unused classroom. The interview instrument consisted of six questions: (1) Do you like (enjoy) watching television? (2) If you could, what would you choose to do: watch television or play outside? watch television or read a book? (3) What are your favorite television programs? What are your favorite cartoons? (4) Who is your favorite person or thing on television? (5) Would you like to be like him/her/it? Why? What would you do if you were _____ ? (6) What comes on television that you do not like? The interviewer recorded all responses elicited after the initial rapport building amenities.

The teachers surveyed were asked to observe their children during free play activities, recess/outdoor play activities, and art activities. The teachers were told that they were taking part in a survey of children's behavior, but not that they should observe for behavior related to cartoons. It was hoped that the Hawthorne effect would be reduced or eliminated by not giving teachers the true nature of the study during the one month observation period. The survey administered to the teachers was composed of five questions: (1) From your observation during free play, which cartoons would you say your children most often watch? (2) Listening to your children

conversations, who would you say is their favorite cartoon character? (3) What cartoon characters do your children dramatize most often during free play or recess? (4) In the children's art work, which of the cartoon characters do they most often draw? (5) In your opinion, what are the effects of television watching on kindergarten children's behavior?

All responses were recorded as frequency distributions and subjected to Chi-square tests, t-tests, and Spearman Rank Order Coefficient (rho) analysis. Comparisons of teacher responses and child responses were made where appropriate. Responses were categorized by content for analysis where necessary.

ANAYLSES OF DATA

The children interviewed had no difficulty reporting their activity or television preferences. Ninety-eight percent of the children interviewed enjoyed watching television. Tables I and II depict the children's preference for television or other activities.

TABLE I: Children's Preference for Television vs. Reading Books

	Watch T.V.		Read Books		Both	
	5 Years	6 Years	5 Years	6 Years	5 Years	6 Years
Boys (N=37)	16% (6)	27% (10)	22% (8)	32% (12)	30% (1)	0
Girls (N=28)	18% (5)	29% (8)	14% (4)	39% (11)	0	0
Total 5 Year Olds (N=24)	46% (11)		50% (12)		4% (1)	
Total 6 Year Olds (N=41)		44% (18)		56% (23)		0
Total Population (N=65)	44% (29)		54% (35)		2% (1)	

TABLE II: Children's Preference for Television vs. Outside Play

	Watch T.V.		Play Outside		Both	
	5 Years	6 Years	5 Years	6 Years	5 Years	6 Years
Boys (N=37)	8% (3)	22% (8)	32% (12)	35% (13)	0	3% (1)
Girls (N=28)	11% (3)	32% (9)	21% (6)	36% (10)	0	0
Total 5 Year Olds (N=24)	25% (6)		75%		0	
Total 6 Year Olds (N=41)		42% (17)		56%		2% (1)
Total Population (N=65)	35% (23)		63% (41)		2% (1)	

A Chi-square test revealed that neither age nor sex significantly affected the activity choices made by the children. It was also found that 78% of the children interviewed watch television with someone rather than alone.

Favorite programs were given by 100% of the subjects interviewed.

TABLE III: Children's Program and Character Preferences

PROGRAMS PREFERENCES					
Total Population (N=65)		Girls (N=28)		Boys (N=37)	
Popeye	43%	Bozo	50%	Popeye	49%
Bozo	37%	Popeye	43%	Bozo	32%
Casper	35%	Casper	43%	Casper	30%
Bugs Bunny	23%	Pink Panther	18%	Bugs Bunny	30%
Superfriends	14%	Donny & Marie	14%	Superfriends	14%
Pink Panther	11%			Incredible Hulk	14%
CHARACTER PREFERENCES					
Total Population (N=65)		Girls (N=28)		Boys (N=37)	
Bozo	18%	Bozo	25%	Popeye	27%
Popeye	18%	Casper	21%	Bozo	14%
Casper	14%	Pink Panther	11%	Batman & Robin	11%
		Bugs Bunny	11%		

Multiple answers were accepted. Programs and characters given a popularity rating of less than 10% are not presented in this table.

The children named a total of 52 different programs in response to question three on the interview. The majority of the programs named are aired on Saturday morning in the area where the children of this study reside. However, 66% of the programs picked as favorites by 10% or more of the children interviewed are aired during the weekday afternoons between 3:00 pm and 4:30 pm.

Taking a closer look at the top ranked cartoon programs, there was no significant difference between the programs most frequently cited by boys and those most frequently cited by girls. The boys named 42 different programs in response to the third interview question. The girls responded with 32 different programs.

Ninety-seven percent of the children responded to the fourth interview question with the name(s) of favorite characters on television. (See Table III) The subjects named 29 different television characters as favorites. Ten percent of the characters named were not cartoon characters.

When asked if they would like to be like their favorite character, 85% of the children said yes. Reasons for wanting to be like a character and things that the subjects would do if they were the character were dependent on the character.

The responses can be categorized as desires for strength and might; desires for friendship; and desires to amuse. It should be noted that 58% of the repondents choosing Bozo were girls and 83% of the respondents choosing Popeye were boys. One hundred percent of the children choosing Batman and Robin were boys while one hundred percent of the respondents choosing Bugs Bunny were girls. Sixty-six percent of the respondents choosing Casper were girls and sixty percent of the respondents choosing Pink Panther were girls.

In order to determine the existence of violence, racism and/or sexism in the programs identified by the children most often as favorites, two independent raters viewed samples of the programs named. On separate occasions, the raters watched the same randomly selected episodes of Popeye and Bugs Bunny. The total viewing time spent was 18 minutes composing three cartoon episodes. A summary of the findings is reported here.

TABLE IV: Violence, Sexism, and Racism in Television Cartoons

VIOLENCE	SEXISM	RACISM
– tank falls on character – kidnapping – electricution – train crash – car crash – jackhammering – punching of adversary – spearing with a pogo stick – character eaten by fish – shooting by cannon – dynamite explosion	– woman waving handkerchieves and yelling yo-ho. – woman being snatched by one man and then another. – woman being pulled between two men, each having one of her legs. – women not included in 2 of the 3 episodes viewed. – women being carried off into the sunset on a man's shoulders.	– one darker character who began every – statement with duh-duh. – language of losing character is dialect, e.g. "I ain't a goin' after it".

Other negative behaviors were: deceit, e.g., hiding behind objects and other characters, dressing up as an inanimate object or an authority figure; trickery, e.g., showing an American Flag to the antagonist who salutes and is concurrently banged on the head by the protagonist, having one character help another by stuffing a cannon which is ignited and thereby blows a hole in the face of the helping character; and teasing, e.g., verbal harassment and name calling.

These observations indicate that the cartoons most preferred by the children in this study are extremely violent. There are some subtle elements of racism and sexism. The observers were quite shaken by the fact that

these episodes seemed to be based on one violent act following another. Violence was the major avenue of problem solving in the cartoons viewed.

When asked about the television program(s) least preferred, the subjects listed fifty-six different characters and/or programs. The most often cited disliked programs were news, cowboys, movies, and scarey pictures. Reasons for disliking programs tended to center on length and content.

The teachers' surveys showed that teachers believe the Superfriends to be the favorite program of their children. The teachers' choices of the favorite programs of children were significantly different from the children's actual choices. However, the teachers' indications of the children's favorite characters were not significantly different from the choices made by the children.

TABLE V: Comparison of Teacher Ranked and Child Ranked Program Preferences

CARTOON	TEACHERS	CHILDREN
Superfriends	1	5
Godzilla	2.5	19
Pink Panther	2.5	6
Casper	4	3
Popeye	5	1
Scooby Doo	8	19
G - Force	8	19
Charlie Brown	8	0
Bozo	8	2
Mickey Mouse	8	10.5
Bugs Bunny	0	4

rho=-2.098 t = -3.419*
* Significant at the .01 level

Teachers' responses indicate that children do dramatize, discuss and reproduce in artwork the characters seen in television cartoons. Most cartoon related behaviors reported by teachers were observed during children's free play and discussions. Children appear to act like and talk about cartoon characters more than they draw them. Teacher comments indicate that teachers feel children are picking up negative values from television. One teacher stated "Kindergarten children are more attracted to or excited by the character who is faster, slicker, stronger, or trickier than the hero representing right or good."

TABLE VI: Teacher Reported Child Behavior

N = 18

Cartoon characters most often talked about in children's conversations		Cartoon characters most often dramatized in children's free play		Cartoon characters represented in children's art work	
Spiderman	39%	Superman	50%	Spiderman	11%
Batman	33%	Batman	28%	Bozo	11%
Pink Panther	17%	Spiderman	22%	Batman	11%
Popeye	11%	Wonderwoman	22%	Godzilla	11%
Scooby Doo	11%	Pink Panther	6%	Popeye	6%
Spiderman	6%	Tarzan	6%	Casper	6%
Superfriends	6%	Popeye	6%	Superman	6%
Wonderwoman	6%	Hulk	6%	Pink Panther	6%
Porky Pig	6%	Godzilla	6%	No Response/ No cartoon characters	50%
No Response/ Don't Know	22%	Superfriends	6%		
		No Response/ Don't Know	11%		

Percentages do not equal 100%. Multiple responses were accepted.

It should be noted that some teachers did not respond to these items on the survey. In the no response category some teachers said they did not observe any reproduction of cartoon characters in their classrooms.

Other teachers were uncertain if their children imitated cartoon characters. Still others made comments that cartoons have little effect on child behavior. They felt that programs with real-life characters such as Mork & Mindy, Happy Days, and Battlestar Gallactica have more effect on child behavior in the classroom. Despite the type of program watched, teachers felt that children could pick up negative values from television.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The number of cartoon programs in children's program listings is far greater than any other type of program. Yet, much of the recent research on children's television programming has centered on programs such as Sesame Street and Mister Rodgers or on the commercials interspersed throughout children's programs. Researchers have not been as concerned, in recent years, with the messages that are being sent to young children through cartoons. Therefore, our study dealt with the impact of television cartoons on child behavior.

The 65 kindergarten children studied were asked: What are your favorite cartoon television programs? What are your favorite cartoon programs? Who are your favorite cartoon characters? Why do you like these characters?

The 18 kindergarten teachers studied were asked: What do you see in the classroom that is evidence of the effect cartoons have on children's behavior? Are you aware of children's program preferences?

Our results indicate that cartoons are the most preferred type of television program for kindergarten children in this study. The most often mentioned program favorites are aired on weekday afternoons. Children tend to watch these programs in the company of other children and/or adults. Children disliked the news, movies, and scarey pictures.

Identification with cartoon characters appears to be independent of sex. For example, girls chose Bugs Bunny, Bozo, and Casper as favorite characters. Interestingly, the subjects listed 29 different characters as favorites but only one of those characters was female--Wonderwoman. The most often cited reason for wanting to be like a specific character was the desire for power--to be strong, to fly, to destroy, and to be big.

Teachers seem to view cartoons as an influence on children's in-class behavior. Television related behaviors most often represented in the classroom appear to be stimulated by the adventure drama shows containing real-life characters rather than by cartoons. Teachers appear to be unfamiliar with the cartoon programs that are most watched by children, those aired on weekday afternoons. Teachers were more familiar with programs aired on Saturdays.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Teachers should find out more about the TV viewing habits of the children in their groups: What cartoon programs do they see regularly? How many hours of TV do they watch? Why do they watch TV for such long hours? Do they watch alone or with others in the family? Given a choice of free-time activities, what is their favorite?

The next step is to get acquainted with the children's favorite cartoon programs. Watch TV for a full Saturday morning, noting the level of cartoon program content as well as the frequency with which the characters are involved in violent, racist, or sexist acts. Adults need to take time and discuss these acts with children. A planned time for discussion with children will help them understand the nature of such behaviors and develop strategies to avoid them in their interactions with others.

Teachers could guide children toward other TV programs such as Sesame Street, Electric Company, and Mr. Rogers, and to activities that are equally appealing and present positive values. Often hobbies and other interests have the advantage of bringing the child closer to a sympathetic individual who will simply listen and admire his or her creation.

Teachers should send home an annotated list of these programs for the coming week, including time and local station information. Classroom discussions afterward may be tied into the curriculum in a meaningful way and may encourage children themselves to become more discriminating.

Teachers could remind parents that each child needs time to talk to the adults in his or her family in a one-to-one situation, so that there is full attention of an interested parent without television or other interruptions.

Teachers can give support to the idea that the child needs to do things with parents or parent substitutes—not high cost—entertainment away from home, but simple everyday activities that provide good companionship: washing the dog, making Valentines, reading aloud or taping a child's story of what happened on the way from school, making bread or building a model plane. The possibilities are endless as teachers can readily demonstrate.

The really effective classroom activity program will hold children fascinated far into the after—school hours. Teacher aides, community volunteers and upper-class "buddies" who work with younger children should be helpful in providing the voice that so many children miss at home and seek from television. This one—to—one relation has strengthened many a child's sense of security and courage to play and experiment independent of television.

Parents should be provided face—to—face conferences, newsletters and repeated follow—up activities based on the content of selected television programs. Such activities can help parents see the significance of television in the lives of their children. As a result, parents will be better able to share selected television programs with their children. Encourage parents to watch the programs the children enjoy, clocking the time their children spend before the TV set for a week and noting the kinds of programs they see. The language that is used and the insinuations made will surely raise the question: "Is this the best we can offer our children?" Parents can watch good TV programs with their children. These are often one-shots overlooked by children but clearly announced in television listings such as TV Guide and Sunday newspapers.

Further research is needed to show if kindergarten children show preference to the race of characters. The researcher could video tape a select group of Bozo Cartoons and have children watch them in a controlled environment over a period of time and observe them in unsupervised play. This could be done to further determine the actual impact the cartoon characters have on the child's behavior relative to racism, and sexism. Research comparing the effect of television cartoons versus adventure drama with real-life characters is also needed.

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